



The RingMaster by TheWriterWithWings

Category: It

Genre: Horror, Mystery

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2014-09-08 01:57:07

Updated: 2014-09-08 01:57:07

Packaged: 2019-12-12 01:20:13

Rating: M

Chapters: 1

Words: 9,915

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Welcome to the Cirque des Ombres. Forget everything you thought you knew because nothing is what it looks like... Explore the world of shadows and let him tell you the stories of the darkened souls that wander in our dreams.

The RingMaster

Allan looked at his daughter into the rear view mirror. The child was leaned against the door, her eyes turned toward the sky, not saying anything. And under her beautiful blue eyes, the marge dark circles betraying her exhaustion achieved once again to convince him he had taken the right decision.

They had tried everything. Meds. Psychologists. Psychiatrists. All kind of experts. All had failed. And when science failed to explain something, what other options did you have?

"We should be there soon, Ems. Do you need something? You hungry?", he asked with an exaggerated cheerful voice.

Emily didn't even look at him. She shook her head slightly before hugging her teddy bear a little tighter with a shiver. He sighed and focused on the road again, his mind too full of worries and expectation to be able to maintain the illusion of a conversation any longer. Lately, above all the rest, she had become silent, as if she was even too tired to talk.

The teddy bear seemed to be the only comfort she could find and he began to hate the damn thing with a passion. Not because she was holding onto it so tight but more because every time his eyes fell on the teddy, it looked like it was reminding him that he was failing to help his own child. That he couldn't give her the safety she needed.

That bear used to be his a long time ago. It was by his side when he was a kid himself. A year after Emiliy's birth, Valerie and him had returned to the house of his childhood after his father died of cancer to clean the place. And in a box of the closet in his old room, here the teddy was, covered in his old jerseys and things, forgotten and abandoned. Valerie had packed it up with the rest of the souvenirs he had decided to take home with him and not longer after that, their little girl had adopted the thing, dragging it behind her everywhere.

No more forgetting the bear as she wasn't able to sleep without it, no more parting the teddy and the child.

Allan had found it cute at first. Now he started to wonder what the bear could do that /he/ couldn't.

Memories were a curious thing. Only the day before he had remembered that the bear used to be his comfort as well during the long sleepless nights of his own childhood. Only the day before, he had remembered that the bear was often the only comfort he could find every night he woke up in fear, screaming and crying, after one of his regular night terrors.

Only the day before had he remembered that him as well as Emily was living a long serie of sleepless nights, terrified about whatever was lurking into the darkness, ready to pinch and bite him if he was tired enough to fall asleep.

And all it took to bring up those memories was the large bruise on the little girl's shoulder, the one he had discovered as he wanted to get her into the shower.

For the last couple of months, his daughter had been too tired and apathic to move and do stuff on her own. Taking a bath, eating breakfast, even simple things as sitting on the couch and turning on the TV had to be suggested by him or his wife before guiding the child toward where she had to go.

It was torture to see how their precious little girl was turning into a ghost of flesh and blood, how terrifying it was to turn around and see her looking into the air, her spoon full of cereals frozen half way from her open mouth as herself seemed to have forgotten what she was about to do, staring at nothing while trying to remember what she was supposed to do next.

She had turned six three months ago and since the past week, Allan had to feed her with a spoon again, not because she couldn't do it herself but because if you'd let her, she'd stay at the table for hours, the bear pressed under one arm, yawning and fighting the urge to sleep while her parents were trying to get her to eat.

What was even more frightening was the strength and the impact of the child's terror during night.

He rubbed his face and his other hand tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

It began with nightmares. Simple nightmares. All they had to do back then was to rush to her bedroom, to calm her down with a kiss on the forehead, to retrieve the bear and tuck her in properly for her to go back to sleep.

But soon the nightmares turned into something else, something that was terrifying her so much that she would beg and sob to be allowed to watch TV instead of falling back asleep, ask for one of them to stay with her, to hold her hand.

At first they thought it was just a test, that she simply wanted to get attention.

now he hated himself for every time he had been mad at her, the nights when he was tired and wanting to go back to bed, growling at her to stop acting like a baby.

Soon though, they realised it was not a simple tantrum.

The way she was shaking when it was time to go to bed, the way he had to practically drag her to her bedroom.....The exhaustion taking over the child becoming visible...

Until that day when she fell asleep between them in the couch and woke up screaming, her eyes widened, not even recognizing them, her tiny hands trying to push away whatever she was seeing in front of her with a terror so clear his own heart had raced.

That night, by instinct, he had grabbed her to pull her as close as possible, to hold her against his chest, all lights on, trying to calm her down despite the way she was crying and begging him to make 'it' go away while Valerie, panicked and in tears herself, was calling all the doctors and hospitals she knew to find someone that would agree on helping them.

But after months of consultations, countless disbelieving looks, thousands of tests, nobody had been able to make it better. now their last option had been to agree on letting Emily be hospitalized in a

clinic where they wanted to drug the child and keep observing her.

Allan had refused. Refused to give up, refused to give his child away to people who seemed to be only interested in the manifestations of the terror than in trying to solve it.

Valerie had been mad at him from the moment he had decided to go against the hospitalization. She wanted her life back. Her sleep back. She was trying to think that maybe Emily had 'a condition' that no one could heal. That she needed to be surrounded by doctors who could help her because Allan and her was obviously helpless. But he had put his foot down and announced that he would take a leave of charges at his work to stay with the child. She was an architect, he was a successful realtor. They had enough spare money to afford this. and now a year later, he was still at home, spending all his days with his daughter, trying to fight 'this' alone with the help of people he'd meet on the internet, support groups and any other way to help he could find.

How many times had he taken the child on his lap, promising her to stay awake, to wake up her as soon as she'd start to move, to protect her from the dark?

And how many times had she woken up again, in tears, terrified, her big eyes full of terror and sadness?

Every. Time.

But she's never be mad at him for letting this happen. She'd never show she was disappointed of that her trust would fade. Every time he promised her that he would find a way, she would nod courageously and swallow back her tears.

It was him now who was doubting himself. Him who would lock himself up in the bathroom to cry, head in his hands, feeling powerless and empty.

What kind of father was he if he couldn't even make his child sleep one night without fear?

The day before though, something had changed.

They were in the bathroom and he was helping her with taking off her pajama, her favorite one. The one with Frozen's Elza on the front and the snow man on the back.

He had stopped talking when she had slowly pulled up the top, revealing the bruise.

She was silent as always and she had dropped the top next to her but he had placed his hands on her arms to keep her from moving while he was looking at the mark.

It was a hand print, a small one. like someone had grabbed her shoulder from behind and squeezed hard enough to leave a mark.

He had seen this mark before.

Staying there behind the child, assaulted by memories, he must have remained silent long enough for the child to notice. She escaped his grip and turned around to look at him curiously.

"Who...who hurt you, baby girl?", he asked in a voice much lower than he had wanted.

The girl had shrugged and looked away before whispering.

"Her. She's just mean." Then she walked into the shower and sat there as she would always do.

For a long moment, Allan forgot how to speak. Machinally, he started to move, showered the girl, dried her up and helped her into her pajama again, not reacting when she dryly made him notice that he had put her on the same pajama again but he had not answered. Instead he had walked with her toward the couch, sat next to her and turned on SpongeBob for her to watch.

He didn't see it though. He was more focused on trying to decide whether or not he was getting crazy.

How could he have forgotten about 'her'?

He was five when she died. That, he remembered. His grandmother was a tiny dry old woman. One who looked like she had no flesh bit

only dried skin around thin bones, one full of bitterness and nastiness. He remembered how everybody feared her but how nobody would say a word when she would ask him to come closer and sit on his lap, he who she called 'such a pretty little boy'. She would always pinch him from behind when nobody looked, hurt him by twisting his wrists. Once, he still knew, she had even bit his shoulder hard before pushing him off her lap with a bemused snort. After that, as he had stopped crying in the back of the car of his parents bringing him back home, he had heard his mom yell at his father that his mother was a wicked and disturbed old witch, that she would never let her come any closer to her son again. How he had loved his mom at this moment. His father had sighed and approved with a tired voice. And the only time Allan had to see his grandmother again had been on the day of her funerals, as he had to go by her open coffin like anybody else, his hand holding on his mom's tightly. He remembered how his mom had looked down at him with a soft smile. "See? She'll never hurt anybody else from now. Say goodbye", she had told him discretely.

How he had wished that she had been right that day.

His own night terrors had started not long after that. Nobody had believed him. Mom had declared that he was simply a child with a too vivid imagination, that the sight of a deceased person had traumatized him more than she had expected.

Nobody believed him when he said that Nanny had come back, that she was in his room at night, trying to get him. He would see her in his dreams, standing in front of the end of his bed, a smile on her face as she was making grabby hands at him, demanding that the pretty little boy would come to her with a voice that seemed to echo through his bones.

And sometimes, when he'd wake up she'd be still there, looking at him.

Sometimes, he would feel her cold hands on his ankles, trying to pull him closer to her, closer to her...teeth.

That's where he had seen that mark the first time. On his right ankle. He had thought that this could prove that he was saying the truth.

But instead, his mother had given him a very shocked look and asked him if 'Daddy had hurt him'.

He had tried so very hard to convince her that it was Nanny. But not far after that incident, his mom had decided to leave the house and to take him with her. After that, his visits to his father had become sporadic as the man had started to drink back then. His terrors had sadly followed him to his new house. He couldn't remember how long it had lasted before they would go away.

But the sight of the mark had reminded him of something else. The very reason he had taken the child on a road trip.

His father had seen the mark on him and something had told the child that Allan was that he was believing him. That night, while his parents were fighting about whatever had happened, Allan, happy to have a reason to avoid sleep even if it was such a bad one, was listening to them, hidden behind the kitchen door.

"Listen....one of my friends went to the same. His daughter was terrified at night. He told me it was something inside their house that was haunting her. They went to find a man. A man who owns a circus. The man made it go away. We have to take Allan to him. You know I'd never hurt him, Elisabeth! Someone else is hurting him, for God's sake! Let me try to help!", his father shouted. His mother had gasped and called him a fool. Was he pretending to believe in ghosts to hide that he had hurt his own son? She had called him a liar and a coward.

But Allan had never forgotten the name his father had mentioned during his attempts to convince his wife. "Mr Lamor."

It sounded so exotic that the child he had been couldn't believe his father would invent something like that.

And last night, while Emily was watching a movie next to him in the couch, he had pulled the laptop on his lap to try to find more about this.

He had googled all possible combinations he could think of. "Lamor, circus". "Lamor, nightmares." Lamor. Lamore. Lamoer? Everything he

could imagination.

But sadly, he couldn't find any result matching his searches.

He was about to give up when his phone rang.

Even Emily had frowned and looked at him when they both heard the ringtone. It was late and almost nobody would call Allan anymore. His entire life was revolving around Emily and the support groups he was going to.

There was no ID showing up on the phone screen but he answered anyway.

"Allan Parker, here."

A male voice echoed into his ear and literally pinned him against the back of the couch.

"Mr Parker. We are sorry to hear that Miss Emily is going through such a difficult time. You're right to believe we can help you. Would you do us the pleasure to join us for the representation we're giving in Saint-Helen tomorrow afternoon? We'll be more than ready to take care of this terrible issue of yours after it. Follow the main road until you see the crows. They'll be so kind to bring you to us. Make sure that Miss Emily brings Barney with her. We are convinced that he can help us with solving our little problem. See you tomorrow, Mr Parker."

Before he could say anything, the caller hung up and Allan brought the phone in front of his face to stare at it. His eyes travelled toward the screen of his laptop then back to the phone. A cold chill ran down his spine but underneath....there was relief. And hope.

He looked at Emily and forced a happy smile on his face.

"Hey, guess what. We're going to the circus tomorrow." He announced.

His practical mind decided to occur all the strangeness of what he had just heard. Questions such as "how did they know?", "who was that?" and "crows?" were trying to submerge his conscience. His

common sense was bringing his mental sanity in doubt again. But his heart was telling him to just go with it for now. And he loved his daughter more than anything, even more than logic and life itself.

If he had to trust a stranger and to follow a damn crow to help his child then he would. No questions asked.

It was not like he could expect answer anyway.

He turned off the laptop and put it away before placing an arm around his daughter.

Then he did his very best to focus on the movie and soon enough, he was too busy wondering if the mermaid would make it to wonder about crows.

And that's why he was driving now toward the little town of Saint-Helen. He had been there once for a monster truck show back in the days when he was still a single man. There wasn't much to see there. But the large and empty fields surrounding the town were perfect to organize big events. You could drive all the way here, let your car on the side of the road and lose yourself in a corn field without meeting any cop or even anyone for that matters.

There was one road going through the town, one made of old asphalt and bricks.

He couldn't help but feel a little anxious as he saw the board with the name of the town on it. Not to mention that scanning the sky to spot crows was feeling very weird. In the backseat, Emily was starting to 'wake up' as he had asked her to look for crows with him. Her child's logic had accepted the request immediately. Apparently, when you were 6, crows could make pretty trustful signs. So long GPS and maps. Turn off your adulthood. You want to find a circus? Follow the birds. If they can call you just because you're looking for them, they could very logically tame crows to show you the way.

Mean grandmothers hurting children decades after their death could make you do the oddest things to get rid of them, Allan thought. At this point, he was ready to do and believe anything. The simple fact that maybe...maybe last night had been their very last sleepless night

ever was enough to motivate him.

He looked into the rear view mirror again and met the bear's eyes. How did they know that 'Barney' was the name he had given to the damn thing years ago? The teddy bear seemed absolutely indifferent to the situation. Its head was hanging above Emily's thin arm while the child was turning her head left and right looking at the sky.

He looked back at the road and he couldn't hide that he was getting restless. Where were the damn birds, damn it?

He drove all the way out of the town. Soon only fields and woods would surround them and he was starting to fear that this all was just a bad joke. Or maybe he /was/ losing his mind and it was all a product of his imagination, getting him to put his kid in the car and drive toward nowhere.

"DADDY", Emily shouted suddenly making him hit the brakes.

He turned around and his heart jumped. The girl was pointed at something in front of the car and on her face, a large smile was replacing the usual thin and pressed together lips, her pale cheeks coloring with excitement.

"What...?", he asked before looking at what she was indicating, even if he wanted to watch that smile a little longer.

There, on the side of the road, a old wood board was announcing an upcoming strawberries sale ('the best of 2004', Allan read, which made him hope no one was still selling ten years old fruits around here, even if it wouldn't really surprise him). On the board, a big black bird was busy with cleaning its feathers. The bird ignore them for two or three whole minutes before shaking itself up and spreading its wings. It cried once, loudly, before flying away above the road.

"Follow him, daddy! Follow him!" Emily shouted happily. He heard her unbuckle her seatbelt and caught her with the corner of his eyes crawl onto the passenger's seat next to him.

He glanced at her and felt his chest inflate with pure relief. For now, just for now, she looked like a normal, excited child. You could still

see the marks left by exhaustion on her face but he would bet no one but him would notice as her smile was simply overwhelming.

She felt watched and turned her face toward him before giggling. "Watch him, Daddy! He's really showing us the road! It's magical!", she exclaimed, almost bouncing on her seat. Even the bear pressed against her chest seemed to bounce.

He couldn't help but chuckle and almost bounce as well;

"We're going to find that circus, Ems! You'll see!", he told her before focusing on the bird that was flying in front of them.

The bird was staying above the road for the main part. Every now and then, like it was really trying to guide them, it was making circles and figures above their head to give them the time to follow.

Mesmerized, Allan followed obediently, hiding his nervousness as the road turned into a dirty path.

Another crow joined the first one as they crossed what looked like a forest then another, then another. Soon, ten crows were making one singular choreography above them and it seemed that Emily didn't have enough eyes to admire them all.

The path ended up in front of a clearing and here, to Allan's surprise and relief, a huge white and red circus tent was settled. There was no other car but theirs and there was no one around to see. Allan turned off the engine and before he could say a word, Emily rushed out of the car, Barney under her arm before slamming the door shut behind her and running toward the entrance of the tent.

"Emily, wait!", Allan called before exiting hastily the car as well.

He ran after her and felt glad to see her stop by the small wood stand in front of the main entrance. Three of the crows had landed on top of it and as he came closer, Allan read the poster on it. "Le Cirque des Ombres - Bienvenue/Welcome! Let your fears behind and enjoy the show! Amazing, hypnotic, spectacular. Redemption as entertainment."

He frowned at the last line but Emily didn't let him think about it any

longer as she grabbed and pulled on his hand.

"Let's go inside, daddy! I don't want to miss the show!", she pleaded.

"Ems...I'm not sure there is a show....There's no one around h....", he started to say but just as to prove him wrong, a tall and thin blonde woman exited the tent and walked toward them.

Allan frowned again as he observed the woman.

There was something strangely familiar about her. Not to mention that she was tiptoeing toward them, a frozen smile glued to her lips, her arms bent in a oddly way like she was carrying an invisible tray.

"Mr Parker! Miss Emily! Welcome to the Cirque des Ombres. We were waiting for you. Come on in. The show is about to start!" she announced.

Allan could swear that her lips hadn't moved while she talked. It didn't seem to bother Emily at all as the little girl nodded approvingly and pulled him behind her to follow the woman.

He looked around and saw no one but followed the little girl without further hesitation. The story had been true so far. The crows. The circus.

They had gone to far to hesitate now.

He blinked to let his eyes adjust to the bright lights inside the tent. To his utter amazement, he saw dozens of white chairs all placed around a rather large ring. Every seat was occupied by someone, dozens of spectators wearing odd clothes as they were issued from different times. He could spot a few men wearing top hats, women with elegants feathers in their hair, people with white gloves and old fashioned boots. Maybe the inhabitants of the town they passed were into that kind of events. Or maybe Allan had arrived by the wrong road and missed the official parking line. Maybe the voice on the phone had forgotten to notice they had to dress up for the show. Anyway, he didn't say a word and sat down next to Emily, not giving another look to the strange blonde who tiptoed away from them, her smile still as bright as before.

To chase away the odd feeling that they were not really fitting in, Allan focused his gaze on the ring and his heart on the tiny hand that had curled up into his. The air was filled with typical circus scents. Sand. Popcorn. Animals. Smoke.

He looked up at the ceiling and gasped. It was quite impressive. Above the ropes and above the lights, he couldn't even see the top of the tent, it looked like every shadow and every dark spot that the bright lights turned toward the ring had chased away were trying to escape the tent by pressing themselves against the ceiling made of drapes and fabrics.

It was almost like they were...moving. Whispering.

Allan shivered and forced himself to look back at the ring.

And then, with no warning, all the lights went off.

Allan could hear the entire crowd gasp at the same moment. Emily grabbed his hand a little tighter and he gave her a gentle squeeze.

Somewhere in the back, a drum started to pulse, like a heart taking its very first beats.

He could see something moving in the dark inside the ring. A tiny spot of light appeared into the center of the ring and grew larger and larger until they could all see a stool. And on this stool, a pair of black leather and impeccable boots. The light continued to grow and there it was, the ringmaster, standing on the stool, his hands crossed over his stomach, his face hidden by the large top hat he was wearing as he was keeping his head bowed.

Nobody moved. They were all waiting for him to speak.

The man took a lower bow before finally raising his head.

Even from where he was, Allan was hypnotized by how bright the eyes of the man were. Almost like they were made of the purest water where only the dark spot of his irises was floating in the middle.

And when he smiled at them, Allan found himself absolutely unable

not to smile back. Curious, he looked around. Everybody around him, his daughter included, was smiling back at the man, eyes glued on him, bodies leaned forward, almost on the edge of their seat.

Allan looked closer at Emily and his curiosity only grew stronger as he saw the Barney was almost falling from Emily's lap.

And Emily didn't even seem to notice.

The bear looked back at Allan with a 'What's happening?'" look. At least, in Allan's imagination.

The man chuckled and focused back on the ringmaster who was still silent.

"Maybe he's waiting for me to pay attention", Allan thought. And the feeling that he might be right made him squirm on his seat. He cleared his throat and focused.

The ringmaster opened his arms and started to talk in a warm and clear voice."

"Mes amis....my friends....Welcome to the Cirque des Ombres.....It is my pleasure to introduce you all to the magical world of.....the shadows."

The man hopped from the stool and walked to the edge of the ring. Then he kept walking slowly, following it.

His voice was inviting, fascinating. Allan could feel it echo through his own chest even if the man didn't even have a mic.

"Forget all you thought you knew. Forget the usual rules. Gravity. Danger. Possibilities. This afternoon, you will discover a whole new world. And I can guarantee you that your life will never be the same. You are the guests of the Shadows and as their voice, I wish you an unforgettable experience. I am.... Monsieur Lamor....and I will be your guide for this unique....unexpected...and incredible voyage.....A journey. Made of clowns. And acrobats. And animals....and mysteries."

Mr Lamor stopped in front of Emily. The little girl's squeal seemed to

make him smile larger even if Allan was sure it was impossible.

The ringmaster bowed to Emily and asked. "Miss Emily....do you love puppets?"

Allan watched his daughter and almost laughed at how hard she nodded.

The ringmaster stepped back before pointing at a spot above him.

"Then for Miss Emily's eyes and yours....Please, welcome.....The WonderfulAdam and Eve!"

The lights on the ringmaster left him to travel high above them all. It stopped on a trapeze before splitting in half to enlighten two people, each on a side of the tent, standing on a very small stand above the depth.

They were wearing matching gold and black suits. Allan had to admit that the woman looked particularly beautiful. She had dark hairs running all the way down to her behind and she was moving with an almost divine grace.

Moving in perfect sync with her, a tall man with dark hair and a golden skin appeared as well and the way the women in the crowd started to whisper excitedly, Allan could only assume he was quite handsome as well.

The acrobats threw themselves into the depth at the very same moment and caught the trapeze at the same time. They started to swing and jump and literally fly above the crowd with an amazing ease. It looked like they had strings attached to their limbs, strings held by a hidden puppeteer skilled enough to make them move the same way at the same time. But their complicated ballet into the air told Allan that it was absolutely impossible for the two artists to be attached to anything.

He realised that Emily's hand had left his and he glanced at her. She was completely focused on the spectacle, both hands crossed under her chin, her eyes sparkling under the lights.

She looked beautiful. And for an instant, Allan couldn't look away.

He was convinced that he was looking at the face of the woman she would once become, the woman she would grow up to be.

She was going to be fine. She was going to be free, he could /feel/ it.

Loud applause snatched him from his reverie and he looked at the ring. The artists were standing in the middle of it and bowing to the crowd.

They turned around and walked out of the circle, still moving the same way. Mr Lamor had called them 'puppets'. They looked like Siamese to Allan.

Talking about the Ringmaster, he reappeared behind the crowd between them and the exit. He was applauding as well.

"Beautiful, aren't they? Adam & Eve, ladies and gentlemen....And now, let's enjoy the next act!", he announced before jumping very smoothly back into the ring.

The next act was just as amazing as the first. Tamed tigers, hoopers, tightropes walkers, clowns, jugglers, magicians, horses.....It was indeed a spectacular demonstration.

Allan stopped overthinking and placed a hand behind his daughter's back before enjoying the show fully. He started to really relax for the first times in weeks, months. The music illustrating every act even got him to tap his foot in rhythm and when the show paused for a few minutes, he spoiled Emily with a huge ice cream, buying one for himself as well. The tall man selling the sweets handed them each a bottle of soda that Emily accepted with an effusion of thank you and a burst of anecdotes about her previous experiences with sodas, magisterial burps included. The tall man listened patiently, nodded at all the right moments and for a few seconds, the thought that someone should complain that he was wasting all his time listening to one single customer popped into Allan's mind. Soon replaced by another: it didn't matter. This show was entirely dedicated to Emily and to Emily only. That fact didn't even bother Allan. His daughter was happy. Screw all the odd facts around that.

After the last round of clowns and jugglers, the lights started to fade

around them.

The ringmaster reappeared and saluted, followed by each artist they had admired. Emily waved madly at the white horses as they passed them and Allan didn't even feel surprised to see the horses turn around in order to bow to Emily once before disappearing after the other artists as well.

The ring was now empty and Emily turned toward him, her cheeks red and her hair in a mess around her face.

"Daddy, did you see the horses? Oh and the man with the burning knives! I would love to see that again!", she commented, her hands still clapping together.

Allan laughed and gave her a hug before noticing that the lights were changing again.

Then he noticed something else.

All the other spectators had left. He was now alone outside the ring with his daughter. He pulled away from Emily and looked around. Before he could spot anything, Emily gasped and giggled as she was looking at something behind him.

"Mr Amor!", she shouted, escaping her father's arms to walk around him and throw herself into the ringmaster's arms.

The man laughed briefly and patted her head.

"Hey, hey, Miss Emily. Did you enjoy the show?""", he said calmly before taking a seat on the other side of Allan.

Allan turned on his seat and watched the man, letting his daughter describing how much she had loved it all in a high pitched tone.

The ringmaster crossed his legs and nodded. He looked so incredibly patient and calm that it was raising admiration.

How many excited children had he taken the time to listen to after a show like this?

And where the hell were all the damn people, Allan's rational mind screamed into his head.

"Well, well. I am glad you enjoyed it. I believe you dropped something", Mr Lamor said pointedly.

Emily frowned and thought about it before her eyes fell on Barney. The teddy bear was laying completely forgotten under Emily's seat.

"Barney!", she gasped before rushing toward the teddy to pick it up.

She hugged it and froze. "Now she remembers why we're here", Allan realised.

The little girl looked up at her father and gumped before walking slowly toward Mr Lamor again.

"Can you really help me?", she almost whisperedn her big eyes canning the ringmaster's face as it to try to read him.

The ringmaster smiled and motioned toward the ring.

"Little girl, do you really think there is something we can't do?", he answered.

Emily looked back at the ring and thought longly about it. "That's my girl", Allan told himself. "Never answer too fast, think about it first in case there is a catch."

The little girl seemed to take a decision and turned toward the men again.

"No, I don't. I think you can help. I believe in you. And Daddy too.", she said.

Allan didn't see the point in protesting. He had seen too much so far to start being a critic.

The ringmaster leaned forward with his elbows on his knees.

"Well then", he said. "I want you to tell me whatever you think I need to know."

Emily remained silent for a minute then took a deep breath. She came closer to the man then pulled on her shirt to show him the mark on her shoulder.

"Nanny did that. She's mean. She tries to grab me but I always wake up before she does. When she is in my dreams...I can hear her screams. And there are monsters with her. Now....now I am too tired to wake up on time. She said" Her voice broke and Allan restrained himself from reaching for her. Unconsciously, he hugged himself insteadn trying to fight the nausea that was overwhelming him.

"She said it wouldn't be long before she can take me away."

A wave of anger hit Allan deep inside. No one....no one could threaten to steal his little girl away. He watched the ringmaster and growled.

"What can we do?"

The Ringmaster looked at him.

"What do you need to tell me, Mr Parker? I believe you have a part in this story as well." He said before nodding toward the teddy bear. "When did the nightmares stop?"

Allan swallowed hard and felt the eyes of Emily on him. The memories had been returning in waves since he had seen the mark. But the part about how his own terrors had stopped was still fuzzy

He sighed and tried to think hard about it, trying really hard to avoid his daughter's gaze.

"My mother and I, we moved a lot. She was a secretary and she had to go where she could find work. I had nightmares for a while. She found someone to sell us sleeping pills and I think that's how....It stopped." He told the man.

Emily came to her and crawl on his lap before placing her free arm around his neck.

"You had bad nightmares too?", she asked.

Allan nodded. "Yes, baby. I never told you because I didn't remember until yesterday. That...woman....you see in your dreams....it was my grand mother. She was a very mean woman indeed. I'm sorry. I didn't know. I don't know why you're dreaming about her....", he apologized before kissing her temple.

Both father and daughter then turned toward the Ringmaster.

This one was looking at the bear that Emily was now holding by its paw. He reached out for it and Emily reluctantly let go on it.

When the man started to talk, Emily curled up into her father's arms as if the absence of the bear in her hands made her need someone else to hold onto. Allan didn't complain and gathered the small girl into a protective hug.

"You see.....sometimes, a soul gets tainted. By sins. Or by simple wickedness. The wisest man can hide the darkest secrets. Your grandmother.....had always been a troubled soul as far as I know. When you die.....you get offered a choice." He raised a hand and counted on his long and thin digits. "One....your soul knows peace and you travel further away. Two...your soul is troubled. You get to go back to solve whatever you left behind, must it be someone to protect, a task that you must accomplish, a place that you refuse to leave. And three.....Your soul is heavy of shadows and you must go where they call you. A dark...dark place full of pain and fire.", He began with an equal voice. Allan listened carefully and felt grateful to the man as it was obvious that he was choosing his words so to not frighten the child.

"Some souls try to cheat the one offering the deals. If your soul is made of light and you wish to stay out of love or care or simply by nostalgia, it is something you have the right to do. If you decide to go back with a darkened soul, it must be to redeem. To escape the grip of the shadows. Some....go back only to keep torturing the ones they left behind. I am sure you heard of ghost stories. These are often darkened souls who escaped the watch of the guardians. Raising troubles and despair because they refuse to go to the darkness. You see....that journey is one you can't go back from. See this as.....a flower. A flower never lives forever. But it can blossom again the next summer. Or it can blossom once in a while....Or..if the soil is too

poor or corrupted, the plant dies. And never grow ever again. Do you understand, Miss Emily?", he asked.

Emily nodded and the man continued.

"There are boundaries to a returned soul, bright or not; You cannot wander away from your blood relatives nor the places where you used to live. Your grandmother, Mister Parker....didn't only haunt your dreams. But the ones of your father as well. And, as you know...our little Emily here. It is to expect that if you hadn't found us....the children of Emily would have known the same very unpleasant problem."

Allan cleared his throat and commented. "Well, to be exact...you found me. You called."

Mr Lamor laughed. "We can only find a will. Where there's a will.....".

"There's a way!", Emily finished with a proud smile.

"Indeed.", Mr Lamor reacted. "Smart girl. Where was I....Ah yes. Blood relatives. See...souls are souls. They are wind in the branches, the smoke above a candle...they can't materialize. In order to not fade...they must corrupt something. Something sensitive to the shadows. Like an object that had been made with tears or blood....Something empty that they would fill."

He raised Barney and Allan's heart skipped a beat. No. He saw himself placing the bear into Emily's arms so many times. He wouldn't forgive himself if...

"Don't blame yourself, Mr Parker", Mr Lamor interrupted his thoughts like he had been able to hear them. Oh, of course, Allan thought; Why the Fuck not?

"The objects themselves....have a conscience. They get filled with the love you put into them. They became....something more than just an inanimated object. This one....Barney...loved you, Mr Parker. Just like it loves Emily. It fights the shadows with all the little energy they have. They keep them away as long as they can. But they are not invincible. Just like us...they get tired. And old. Without Barney's

obstination, you would have gone though way worse, Mr Parker. Now....as the shadows tighten around Emily, the bear's energy is fading. And this is why the soul we're talking about have been able to touch her. You came to find me right on time. Who knows how long our courageous Barney could have hold up? He put up a hell of a fight. And now...now he and Emily must be freed of the shadows. Fortunately, it will be uite easy for our little princess. Barney, on the other hand, has a long way in front of him. But...I'm rambling. We need to take care of this matter now."

Mr Lamor got up and watched both of them.

"Mr Parker...Miss Emily....Are you ready? Be well aware that this will require your entire trust into me. It's a condition we cannot negociate." He said.

The father and the child didn't hesitate and noddod before standing up as well.

The ringmaster handed the bear back to Emily and held her his hand to take.

"You must come with me inside the circle. You father must stay out of it. And no matter what happens, Mr Parker, i must insist. Do not step into the circle."

Allan watched Emily and her determination showed in her eyes. They both trusted the stranger. Maybe they were both crazy.

But they had no other option.

"I promise", he said as sternly as he could. "Just...take care of her. She's....my baby girl". His voice broke slightly and he didn't try to hide it.

Mr Lamor patted his shoulder before helping Emily inside the ring. He guided her toward the very same stool they had seen at the beginning of the show. The one in the middle of the ring. He made Emily sit on it, with Barney pressed against her heart.

The ringmaster kneeled in front of her.

"Miss Emily...You are a very courageous young lady. I know you will do as I say and I admire your bravery. You do know that every service has a price, right?", he asked her with a gentle voice.

Emily gave him a nod. Yes, she knew that. Nothing was for free. But she wanted the nightmares gone. She would give all she could for that.

"Good. The price I will ask from you is in two parts. First, you will have to let go on something. Second...you will have to accept something in return. See it as a favor. Do we have a deal?"

Emily glanced at her father who was pacing next to their seats.

She focused back on the strange man and shook the hand he was offering her. "Deal." she whispered.

"This is what we are going to do. From the start to the end. No bad surprises if we stick to the plan. It's like your own circus act." He smiled and she smiled in return. She liked this idea. Mr Lamor pointed at the bear.

"I will ask you to hop from the stool and to place Barney on it. I told you earlier that it is going to be a long way for him to be free from the shadow. I will keep him here as a full member of our crew. To reward him for having watched over your daddy and you, and this is our secret, Miss Emily, Barney will turn into a real bear and he will be treated as one of us. With respect and affection. Until the shadows decide to let go on him. That day, Barney will have the choice to return to his original purpose or to start a whole new life, to win his spot into the light and earn his very own soul. I know it will be very hard for you to leave him behind but it is a price you both will have to pay. I can tell you he will miss you just as much as you will miss him. Do you understand?"

Emily's eyes filled with tears. She had feared that request. She hugged her teddy bear a little more and buried her nose into the fur of his neck but bravely, she nodded again.

"Very good", The man said. "When I will tell you, you will place him on the stool. You will have to tell him good bye. Then you will have to

repeat the exact words I will whisper into your ears. Then, my beautiful little darling, you will have to close your eyes and to NOT open them again until I tell you so. This is very important. I will guide you out of the circle and take you back to your father. You will be free. And ready to accept the favor I will ask you for. Now....here we go. Time to say good bye to Barney. Take your time, young lady." he told her sweetly before getting up and standing back.

He watched her hopping off the stool hesitantly before sitting the bear on it.

She took her time to adjust the arms and legs of the bear before kissing its head.

"Barney...I love you. I....He will take care of you. I know he will. Don't forget about me, okay. Don't be mad. I just...I just want the nightmares to go away. I love you so very very much. Good bye...". A sob shook her entire being and she jumped on the bear to hug it tight once more. Then she wiped the warm tears away from her face with her sleeve and sniffled.

Mr Lamor crouched behind the little girl and placed his large and soft hands on her arms.

He rested his chin on her shoulder and whispered.

"Now I am going to say the words, slowly. You will repeat them after me while looking at who is standing behind Barney.", he announced.

Emily frowned.

"There is no one behind him, Mr Lamor...", she retorted.

"Are you sure? Look closer, Miss Emily."

She narrowed her eyes and looked above the bear. She could see the other side of the tent, the long ribbons of white and red. She could see how the lights were making the dust in the air sparkle. And she could see...Something more. Like the little waves of heat you could spot above the road on the hot summer days. But those were darker...She found one a little darker than the rest and followed it. It was forming a silhouette...and the silhouetter was getting darker.

Like it was trying to be seen, to be....

She jumped and her back hit the chest of the man. Between two blinks, she could see it. Her. She was there. Her face was....melting. Like it couldn't stay together like it did in her dreams.

Mr Lamor didn't need the little girl to confirm. He started to whisper into her ear. pausing now and then to give her the time to repeat after him. She had found his hands and were squeezing them tightly now. The man didn't mind.

"In the name of my family.....and the generations to come.....I disown you. Be gone and go to the shadows....you belong to.....Never to come again....and never to follow thee blood....you're no longer....related to."

He nodded slightly as she bravely repeated each word.

"Now close your eyes. And turn away. I will hold your hand but it is important that you turn and walk away on your own, Emily. Whatever you hear.....do not open your eyes."

She complied and used both hands to hold onto one of his. As she turned away from Barney and the stool, a terrifying scream pierced the air. Emlli got tempted to let go on the hand to cover her ears but she couldn't let go on the only comfort she could find now. Not with her eyes closed. The scream didn't stop and she was sure to hear words and whispers all around them. "Pretty boy.....MINE.....Come back here! Miiiiiine!".

She swallowed hard and followed the pace the man next to her was adopting. She felt him guide her across the ring then help her out of the circle.

Allan who had not lost a minute of him was covering his ears but his eyes was glued to the middle of the ring. He had watched how his daughter had let go on the bear then with horror, he had witnessed the appearance of Nanny close, so damn close of his precious child, with her bony arms trying to reach out to the child. He had seen the pure hatred and fear in Nanny's eyes as the Ringmaster had guided the girl away from her and how freaking calm and unimpressed the

man looked like.

As his daughter had reached the edge of the ring, it had been painful not to catch her but he didn't want to ruin the whole process.

The Ringmaster exited the ring as well, still holding the hand of the girl. He snapped the fingers of his free hand and drapes fell from the ceiling, hiding the ring completely from their sight. When the drapes hit the dirty floor, the scream stopped as by magic and the silence returned inside the tent.

"You can open your eyes, Miss Emily. It's over. I believe your father needs a hug though."

The girl didn't even open her eyes that she was already in her father's arms, sobbing in relief and unravelling exhaustion.

Allan held her tight, whispering reassuring nothings into her ear. After a moment, she pulled away slowly and turned her face toward Mr Lamor.

"It's not over. I still owe you a favor", she said. "It was the deal." She added sternly.

Mr Lamor laughed and sat down on a nearby chair.

"Young lady, you are indeed brave and smart. You are right. I have a favor to ask you. One, I am sure, you will accept without a single hesitation.

Allan sat down as well, his legs shaking. He couldn't let go on his daughter, not yet. His eyes kept returning to the drapes as if he was expecting some monstrosity to crawl from under it. But the conversation between Emily and Mr Lamor intrigued him enough to distract him.

The man seemed to pat his pockets like he was looking for something. He winked at the child before pulling something out of the inside of his long jacket.

Emily squealed and applauded before opening her hands to receive the tiny kitten that Mr Lamor had made appear.

"I am as well a bit of a magician. Or...;such a distracted man that I do not notice small animals in my pockets", he joked.

Emily laughed and shook her head. "You wouldn't forget that." She claimed. "Who is it?", she asked. Allan frowned at his daughter's question but the Ringmaster seemed to find it perfectly normal.

"This....is Felix. He used to be a very brave tiger. He will be dearly missed by all of us. But....his journey is over. And the shadows have no longer a claim on him. He died from old age at the end of a very long and entertaining existence by my side. He as well, just like Barney, used to fight against the darkness. He as well, just like Barney, joined our family to recover. And as you can see, he made his choice as for his new life into the light. Take a good care of him. They said that cats used to be divine. It is something I am willing to believe." He said with a gentle caress on the top of the cat's head.

He got up and shook Allan's hand.

"Your daughter has a very long and interesting life ahead of her. One that will start, of course, by a very necessary catch up on sleep for the both of you. You are now free to go, my friends. But, Mister Parker if I may take the liberty of asking /you/ a favor.....let the black dog cross the road when you'll see it. Such a great destiny could not possibly get wasted in such a ironic turn of fate. Good bye, Mister Parker. And Good bye, young lady. Sweet dreams from now on."

Allan was about to say something when the blonde woman reappeared.

"Mister PArker, Miss Emily....the show is over. You must go home." She said, the frozen smile still on her lips.

Emily wrapped the kitten into her shirt and looked up at her father.

"Let's go, Daddy. I'm tired." she declared.

Allan nodded and look at Mr Lamor.

Well. At where Mr Lamor was supposed to be.

The man was nowhere to see.

He opened his mouth to comment on the sudden disappearance but Emily pulled on his hand once more. He followed her outside and back to the car.

He opened the door for her and looked back once more at the circus tent.

The clearing was empty.

"Daddy.....", Emily called with a tired voice. Allan renounced trying to understand and got into the car as well. On the other side of the clearing, there was an access to a solid and real road. Exactly what he needed.

Something solid. And real.

As he drove away, he heard his daughter's voice one more.

"We won't say a word to Mom. She wouldn't understand. She didn't see the crows. Right, Daddy?", she asked.

He thought about this then looked inside the rear view mirror but he didn't have to answer anymore.

There, on the back seat, with the kitten curled up in her arms, Emily was sleeping soundly already, her mouth hanging slightly open, her chest moving regularly up and down.

He stared at her for a few seconds before something caught his eyes.

They were on a deserted road in the middle of nowhere but on the side of the road, a large black dog was sitting onto what looked to be an old board abandoned on the ground. It seemed to wait for an opportunity to cross the road but as Allan looked behind them again, there was no other car to see. Ahead of them, a few feet away from the dog, he could spot old railroad tracks. No barriers, no sign.

But the words of the ringmaster echoed through his mind again and he hit the brakes. "Let the black dog cross the road when you'll see it."

The car stopped completely and the dog watched in his direction

with an unimpressed look. Then, slowly, it stooped up, shook itself up and crossed the road.

As its first paw hit the asphalt, a train appeared from under the cover of the woods and passed in front of Allan's eyes with an deafening wooshing sound.

The dog glanced toward the train and resumed walking toward the other side of the road before disappearing behind a bush.

Allan's fists tightened so hard around the steering wheel that it became hurtful.

Had he not stopped....The train would have hit the side of the car with no chance for him to avoid it.

He glanced at the little girl in the mirror who was sleeping so deeply that she was completely unaware of what had just happened.

"Such a great destiny could not possibly get wasted in such an ironic turn of fate", Mr Lamor had said.

Irony.

A father distracted by his daughter sleeping soundly for the first time in years getting both of them killed because he didn't see a train coming.

Yes, that would have been ironic. But thanks to a man leading a circus that could vanish in a second, a man who could send souls back to.....wherever they belonged to, a man who had a family made of artists who looked like they were simple objects acting like they forgot to stay inanimate, this father had stopped for a dog no one could possibly predict it would be there. And by doing so, he had saved his own life and his daughter's.

How is this all even possible?

Why could it even be possible?

Too many questions. Too many impossible facts....

So Allan Parker did the only thing his common sense could come up with.

He started the engine again and drove away, whistling a tune he had once heard while watching a beautiful woman flying and twirling above his head.

And he would do so until he was home and until his head would hit the pillow so he could sleep. Sleep for the first time in years. Not afraid of hearing a scream coming from the room next door.

As a matter of facts, todays had been the last time he'd hear such a scream again. His sleepless nights, his worries and the marks on his daughter's skin...all of it had remained in a ring, surrounded by drapes he would never see again.

And he was perfectly okay with that.